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Comments on Presidents Council on Food Safety submitted by The Grocery Manufacturers of America.

Sincerely,
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Assistant, Scientific and Regulatory Policy

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February 14, 2000

Dockets Management Branch
Food and Drug Administration
5630 Fishers Lane
Room 1061
Rockville, ND 20852

RE: Docket No. OPP-00550
President's Council on Food Safety; Notice of Meeting
12/15/1999

The Grocery Manufacturers of America (GMA) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the development of a comprehensive national food safety strategic plan (the plan) by the President's Council on Food Safety. GMA applauds the Council's solicitation of public participation in this most important and timely process. We endorse this effort to improve the coordination and communication among the several agencies that work in cooperation with the food industry to ensure that Americans continue to enjoy one of the safest, most wholesome, and most abundant and affordable food supplies in the world. Through the appropriate use of all available resources, and application of consistent, science-based regulation that is harmonized throughout the world,

this objective can be achieved. GMA is the world's largest association of food, beverage and consumer brand companies. With U.S. sales of more than \$450 billion, GMA members employ more than 2.5 million workers in all 50 states. The organi!

zation applies legal, scientific, and political expertise from its member companies to vital food, nutrition, and public policy issues affecting the industry. Led by a board of 42 Chief Executive Officers, GMA speaks for food and consumer product manufacturers at the state, federal and international levels on legislative and regulatory issues. The association also leads efforts to increase productivity, efficiency, and growth in the food, beverage and consumer products industry.

I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

As the President's Council moves forward with the development of a comprehensive strategic plan, we must continue to recognize that, as a nation, we have already achieved a great deal. The United States enjoys a fundamentally safe food supply in large part because of the highly effective partnership that exists between government agencies with responsibility for food safety and the food industry. Thus, in discussing how we can enhance food safety, we begin with an unparalleled base of knowledge, experience, and achievement.

We also begin with a food safety system that, though perhaps not perfect, is effective, and that system should be enhanced not replaced. The key to the optimum food safety system of the future is a sharper focus, not a change in organizational structure, as some critics of the current system have suggested. Arbitrarily reorganizing the government, tempting as that might sometimes be, will not make our food supply safer. Better focusing our limited public and private resources and using them more effectively to address real food safety hazards, on the other hand, will make a significant difference. A thoughtful, highly substantive strategic plan is an essential tool in the effort to enhance the performance of our current food safety system.

GMA appreciates the work that has gone into the development of the strategic plan as it is an important part of a more effective national food safety system. In GMA's September 1, 1999 comments we urged that two issues be considered before embarking on the creation of this plan. First, is the plan consistent with and does it reflect basic principles essential to any effective food safety system?

After reviewing the plan it is evident that the basic principles essential to an effective food safety system have been considered because nothing has been left out. Before the Council takes another step forward, prioritization and focus is essential.

Second, does the plan capture not only the Council's and the agencies' aspirations for enhanced food safety, but does it also provide a practical, concrete roadmap for how to achieve it?

The plan remains very broad and equally vague. It is difficult to determine how the Council intends to accomplish the goals, in what order, and what resources it's going to use to achieve them. After first prioritizing the goals and objectives we suggest that the Council develop a detailed action plan laying out how and when each will be carried out. Without this the strategic

plan will be essentially meaningless.

We respectfully request that the council "beef up" the plan to include actions that will result in real enhancements to food safety. In addition, it would be helpful to describe what resources will be used, how they will be used, and within what timeframe will specific goals be accomplished.

II. AT THE FOUNDATION OF ANY EFFECTIVE FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM

As GMA has stated previously, we believe four unifying principles must be the basis of the nation's food safety activities. These include:

- * Research and science: Our food safety system must be based on science. We must identify and fight true causes of foodborne illness with the right scientific weapons. The United States government must provide the needed leadership in a world that seems to be moving dangerously, and unfortunately, toward precautionary regulation.

- * Education: Everyone who handles food from producer to consumer must be educated about his or her role in helping to reduce the risk of foodborne illness. Medical care providers, especially those catering to susceptible populations, must be educated and then must educate their patients about foodborne illness and ways to reduce their risk. Mechanisms must be developed and funded to help meet these goals.

- * Adequate staffing and resources: Consumers, and the food industry, are best served by strong food safety agencies -- including the Food and Drug Administration, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and state and local health agencies -- which develop policy based on science. Facilities and personnel must receive full funding in order to provide this strong science base.

- * Better coordination: Better coordination and utilization of government resources requires focusing those resources on real food safety hazards with science-based solutions. This means a shift in emphasis to rely upon the use of modern microbiological detection technology to identify and address food safety hazards, and away from antiquated labor intensive inspection procedures that can do little more than measure a food's organoleptic characteristics.

GMA urges the Council to ensure that all goals and objectives incorporated in the strategic and action plan are fully consistent with these principles.

III. PRIORITIZATION

In an era of limited resources and boundless demands, the Council's comprehensive strategic plan must assist the agencies to use the food safety resources they already have in the most effective way possible. A document that merely identifies laudable goals, with insufficient regard to their practical implementation, may make us feel good in the short term but will produce few tangible results. In this regard, although the goals as set forth by the Council are appropriate in terms of providing a starting point for a concrete roadmap, they remain theoretical and skeletal. We

recommend the following prioritization scheme be adopted:

Priority 1: Risk Communication

While we appreciate the logic used to lay out the goals, GMA believes that for the most part many risks have already been assessed and regulations put in place to address them. What is now essential is for the regulatory agencies to lead risk communication efforts. It is through this leadership that the agencies will reach the very consumers whose public health they are charged with protecting.

Rather than imposing unnecessary regulations on the industry that do little more than give consumers the false perception they are being protected by their government, we fully support the development and implementation of education programs aimed at consumers. This includes the development of education programs for medical school students in order to reach future pediatricians, obstetricians and others. It includes the development and implementation of programs for primary school children in concert with the state and local government.

While the food industry takes its responsibility to ensure a safe food supply very seriously, consumers ultimately prepare and handle the food. It is essential that they understand how to minimize their risks when doing so, and government at all levels must be committed to playing a role in their education.

With this goal in mind we support the following objectives, which have been modified to better reflect the need for focus. [The number in () refers to the objective in the draft Strategic Plan upon which the new objective is based.]:

Objective 1(2): Develop science-based education and training programs focused on prevention of foodborne illness and hazards. We support the continuation of programs currently underway to provide guidance to growers, producers, transporters, and retailers of foods. However, we suggest that the development and implementation of new programs be aimed at medical care providers and consumers.

Objective 2(3): As part of this goal, GMA concurs that accurate, rapid access to information about hazards and outbreaks is essential when they occur. Dedication to this goal by government at all levels is needed in order to sustain public confidence in the food supply. The federal government must provide the necessary leadership on how to communicate this very important information, especially targeting those individuals at greatest risk. It is only then that consumers can take appropriate action to protect them. Rapid, inaccurate information will unnecessarily alarm the public and do little to protect their health. GMA continues to support the work of the Foodborne Outbreak Response Coordination Group (FORCG) in their efforts to further this objective, and would like to see them built upon.

Specific recommendations:

* We recommend that the goal statement read as follows: The United States food safety system

openly and effectively provides information and education on food safety risks to consumers, medical care providers, educators, industry and others on how to control those risks;

- * Medical care providers of vulnerable populations and consumers in those vulnerable populations must be the target of any new food safety messages and programs;

- * Develop "train-the-trainer" programs in order to effectively use limited resources; and

- * Foster an environment dedicated to assuring that important information about food safety emergencies is not only rapid but accurate as well.

Priority 2: Science and Risk Assessment

GMA supports a food safety system that is based on science and risk assessment at the national and international level. We believe that the US government needs to play a leadership role in international forums to assure science is the foundation of all international standards. With this in mind we support the following objectives:

Objective 1(5): First and foremost, in order to have a science-based food safety system resources must be dedicated to enhancing the scientific infrastructure and skills at the federal, state, and local levels. Without investment in top notch personnel and state-of-the-art facilities how can the government's food safety system be the best it can be? GMA suggests this be the first priority.

Objective 2 (6): Secondly, the best way to strengthen any program is to first identify and evaluate its weaknesses. GMA recommends that research, risk assessment, and surveillance programs underway be evaluated for their effectiveness. This should provide the necessary guidance to develop and implement programs that assure maximum public health.

While we would start here, GMA fully supports the remaining objectives outlined in this section as follows:

Objective 3(1): Strengthen the scientific basis for food safety policies and regulatory decisions through risk assessment.

Objective 4 (3): Develop and implement a unified, risk-based problem-solving research agenda particularly aimed at bridging identified gaps.

Objective 5(4): Identify emerging and potential high-risk food safety threats.

Objective 6 (2): We would change this objective to read "expand surveillance and data collection capabilities for adverse human health outcomes related to the food supply in order to develop appropriate, effective risk management strategies."

Priority 3: Risk Management

GMA places great importance on assuring that food safety is managed effectively and to this end the industry recognizes their role in implementing the appropriate mechanisms to achieve this goal. We are hopeful that risk assessment and risk management increasingly become a part of the national regulatory framework, both in spirit and in reality. A recent USDA announcement describing their plan to issue press releases for all food recalls, not just those related to food safety, goes against the spirit of what is being proposed by the Council. Public announcements such as this do little to enhance the safety of our food supply and will likely result in nothing but consumer confusion. Our national policies must reside on a more solid foundation than this.

Objective 1 (2 & 7): The best thing the federal government could do is promote the development and implementation of preventive techniques and controls using risk-based approaches and establishment of national standards. This means first expanding the use of irradiation to a wide variety of foods and then requesting a change in the law so that prior FDA approval is not needed. Techniques such as irradiation should be promoted by agencies, rather than hindered. This is the kind of leadership the industry, consumers, and others need and expect from the federal agencies.

GMA does not support performance standards like those in place today for raw ground meat. This is not progress. It is living in the past of archaic poke-and-sniff government policy, which can hardly be described as "state-of-the-art" or "science-based." GMA supports the development of a prevention-based food safety system like that which the food industry relies upon today.

Objective 2(5): Protect the food supply through consistent training and consistent enforcement of food safety laws and established regulatory requirements. Consistency in training and enforcement is essential. GMA recently cosponsored an event with FDA, NCFST and the food industry. The event's purpose was to share the latest science with FDA field investigators as well as to provide a forum for discussion and sharing outside of the customary regulator/regulated setting. We hope these types of programs will continue to receive the support they need from FDA and encourage other agencies to support similar ones.

Specific recommendations:

* Labeling regulations for irradiation are not an example of a requirement to "provide consumers the information necessary for them to feel confident in their selection of foods processed by enhanced safety technologies." If anything, the requirement deters their purchase and further deters the use of the technology. GMA has stated previously that our members do not believe irradiation should be a food additive and further that it shouldn't be subject to specific labeling requirements. Instead, addressing the unnecessary labeling requirement for irradiation is a perfect example of the kind of bold and progressive step that the Council could take to show that they are committed and doing everything possible to address food safety in an effective and meaningful fashion. With this kind of leadership hopefully consumers can enjoy full implementation of all food safety technologies without delay.

* GMA supports the participation of the Agencies in international forums and organizations, like the Codex Alimentarius Commission, to assure science-based standard development, and adoption of effective risk-based port-of-entry procedures by US trading partners.

IV. ORGANIZATION CONSIDERATIONS

As GMA has stated in public and written comments before, we believe the key to an effective food safety system is focus, not a change in organizational structure. Therefore we would support efforts to enhance coordination and utilization of government resources through the development of a comprehensive federal food safety Strategic Plan and unified annual budgets as well as coordination of microbial research, as described under Option I, Coordinated Federal Food Safety System. We would not support establishment of a more bureaucratic structure than already exists, which would occur if sub-option A of Option I were adopted. However, we would support the Council continuing their work.

As part of the strategic plan it may become clear that certain consolidations would streamline current food safety functions. Sub-options A, B, and C under Option II, Specific Consolidations of Food Safety Functions, lay out some of these changes that might enhance effectiveness. GMA will further consider these possibilities when more details are provided. All other options would require a restructuring of government, which GMA members do not support.

V. SUMMARY

GMA applauds the President's Council's efforts in developing this draft Strategic Plan. As the Council continues to refine the plan, we urge them to assure the foundation is grounded on the four basic principles of research and science; education; adequate agency resources; and coordination. We urge the Council to prioritize their goals starting with Risk Communication, Science and Risk Assessment and then Risk Management. In doing so we encourage them to focus and construct a food safety system founded on what is best for public health, not for politics.

Thank you for your consideration. GMA is eager to continue participating in this most important process.

Respectfully submitted,

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